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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000102

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TAGS: PREL TU GR

SUBJECT: TURKEY: POSITIVE ATMOSPHERE SURROUNDS KARAMANLIS

VISIT

REF: A. ANKARA 41

1B. ATHENS 07 2324

1C. ANKARA 07 6388

Classified By: PolCouns Janice G. Weiner for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary and Comment: Turkey and Greece's decade-long rapprochement will take a much awaited step forward with Greek PM Costas Karamanlis' January 23-25 trip to Ankara and Istanbul -- the first visit of a Greek prime minister to Turkey in 49 years. His meetings with high-level GOT officials, business leaders, and Orthodox Church representatives are the latest in a series of engagements that have greatly contributed to the thawing of relations. Both governments are expected to keep the tone as positive as possible, focusing on economic issues and Greece's support for Turkey's EU bid. The Turkish military, despite Greek media claims of increased incursions into Greek airspace, continues to try to play a constructive role. The most important deliverable will likely be the visit itself, though it could lay the groundwork for future agreements on Cyprus and the Aegean. Any maritime or airspace incident while Karamanlis is in Turkey could undermine ongoing efforts. End Summary and Comment.

12. (C) The GOT, the Turkish business community, and media optimistically await Greek PM Karamanlis' historic trip to Ankara and Istanbul, January 23-25. It has been a long time in coming: Erdogan has hoped for this return visit since the Turkish PM traveled to Athens in 2004. Details remain close hold and neither government has publicly discussed the agenda, deliverables, or delegation composition. Turkish MFA Maritime Department Head Mehmet Poroy explained both sides will try to "keep things as positive as possible." Poroy expects the GOT to steer clear of any contentious issues, and focus instead on the improving bilateral relationship, increasing economic cooperation, and Greece's support for Turkey's EU bid. Alexandros Ioannidis, Political Officer at the Greek Embassy in Ankara, agreed. He noted discussions are underway for Karamanlis to speak at a local university.

13. (C) PM Erdogan remarked to Codel Martinez on January 7 that Turkey's relations with Greece are the best ever, because Turkey has focused on "building friendships" (ref a). Sema Sezer, a retired Turkish intelligence officer now working as a Greece/Cyprus expert at Ankara-based think tank ASAM, attributes the on-going dtente to the rise of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), its "zero

problems" with neighbors policy, and AKP's emphasis on EU membership. Additionally, Greek Foreign Minister Bakoyannis' strong statement in support of Turkey's EU bid during FM Ali Babacan's December visit to Athens greatly improved Greece's political image in the Turkish press (ref b).

¶4. (C) Ever strengthening economic ties between Greece and Turkey are the true engine of rapprochement. Bilateral trade volume increased 114 percent from 2002-2006. Greek companies have also made significant inroads into the Turkish banking sector, including the purchase of considerable shares in Finansbank and Tekfenbank. In 2007, energy sector cooperation resulted in the opening of a Turkey-Greece natural gas pipeline and an electricity sharing arrangement. However, Iran's recent cut-off of gas to Turkey caused Turkey to shut down the pipeline to Greece on January 6. If not resumed by the time of the visit, Karamanlis will likely raise the issue during his bilats with GOT officials.

¶5. (C) The Turkish General Staff (TGS) views the de-escalation of tensions with Greece positively, and continues to play an important reconciliation role. The confidence building measures Foreign Ministers Babacan and Bakoyannis announced in December were primarily related to mil-to-mil cooperation, and mirror those initially proposed during TGS Chief Yasar Buyukanit's November 2006 visit to Athens (ref c). These measures include:

- Creating a joint Turkish-Greek land unit to serve in the NATO Response Force;
- Adding an additional joint military unit to participate in future peace implementation missions;
- Regularizing meetings between chiefs of defense and staff

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officers;

- Exchanging visits between commanders of the units deployed on the Greek-Turkish border; and
- Establishing a stand-by civilian emergence response task force to facilitate the delivery of emergency aid when natural disasters occur.

¶6. (C) The military, however, continues firmly to oppose Greek desires to extend its claim on territorial waters in the Aegean. It views this as a "red line" issue, according to Sema Sezer, as it would allow Greece to dominate the sea lanes in the Aegean at Turkey's expense. Sezer dismissed claims that the TGS seeks to undermine the Karamanlis visit, including through recent "anti-Greek" postings on the TGS website, as "baseless" speculation on the part of the Greek media.

¶7. (C) Karamanlis' visit will occur at the height of the gilthead bream fishing season, a traditional period of increased tensions between Turkey and Greece. Incidents of maritime violations in the Aegean historically escalate in December and January when fishing vessels enter the waters near the Kardak islets located off the southwest coast of Turkey. According to an annual TGS report posted on its website in December, Greece was the top violator of Turkish waters in 2007 and the number of incidents increased by 50 percent over 2006, primarily around the Kardak islets. The growing number of violations, the increased frequency of Greek Coast Guard escorts for the fishing vessels, and Greece's discussions with Egypt and Lebanon over delineation of undersea borders have prompted some Turkish critics to question Greece's Aegean intentions, noted Sezer.

¶8. (C) Despite ongoing tensions, the two governments appear to be making steady progress behind-the-scenes. Mehmet Poroy reported GOT and GOG officials have met privately 37 times since 2002 at the Under Secretary-level in an attempt to resolve their territorial disputes. Both governments have kept the meetings' purpose and content as compartmentalized as possible to avoid information leaking to the press. On January 18, MFA U/S Ertugrul Apakan held the latest round of

discussions with his Greek counterpart in Istanbul. As PM Erdogan told Codel Martinez, a successful Karamanlis visit could lead to a new phase of mutual understandings on lingering disputes over Cyprus and the Aegean.

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